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Restaurant review: Ellerbe Fine Foods



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FORT WORTH – Taste the creamy corn soup she made with roasted poblano and sonora chiles, or her double-cut lamb chops, dusted lightly with curry powder, set atop Israeli couscous, and complemented by creamy, cool tzatziki, and you have to conclude that Molly McCook was born with the right name.

Restaurant Information

[Ellerbe Fine Foods](#)

Rating:



(Excellent)

Average meal price:



(\$15–\$30)

Service:

Ranges from professional, thoughtful and attentive to amateurish

Ambiance:

Two laid-back yet elegant dining rooms with butcher-paper-covered white tablecloths, nice spot lighting and decent acoustics for conversation

Location:

1501 Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth

Hours:

Lunch: Tue-Fri 11 am-2 pm

Dinner: Tue-Thu 5:30-9 pm, Fri-Sat 5:30-10 pm

Payment Information:

All major credit cards accepted

Special Features:

Wheelchair accessible, wine and beer

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That is to say that the chef at the 4-month-old Ellerbe Fine Foods in Fort Worth can really cook. The way that minty tzatziki mingles with the juice of the lamb is brilliant.

McCook owns the restaurant with her childhood friend Richard King, who runs the front of the house. It took them only four months, says King, to convert a 1920s gas station into the restaurant. Now it looks more like a home, with picture windows in two open, airy, comfortable dining rooms with white-clothed tables covered with brown butcher paper, and a fancy food shop up front. I love the paintings that decorate the walls, by Fort Worth artist Linda Wallace: a squishy-looking red chair, some chunky-looking Bartlett pears. But my favorite is the big, juicy slice of watermelon. Perhaps I'm not the only one: A note says that it was painted by Wallace's 6-year-old granddaughter, and it's not for sale.

McCook and King grew up in Shreveport, La., and the menu reflects that, with dishes such as New Orleans barbecue-style Gulf shrimp. Cooked to that sweet spot of just so and served with spoon bread and a sauce spiked with Abita Amber, a Louisiana lager, it's a jazzy way to start dinner.

But you can't, because it's gone now. See, the menu (at least parts of it) changes weekly according to the seasons and to what looks great to McCook at the moment. A couple of weeks ago the barbecue shrimp were replaced by sautéed shrimp with fried green tomatoes. Who knows what it'll be next week?

If that sounds more like a California sensibility than a Louisiana one, that may be because McCook spent a number of years in California, attending cooking school in San Francisco, studying with Gary Danko (one of that city's top chefs) and working at Stars, a quintessential California restaurant. She moved to Los Angeles in 2003 and went to work for Suzanne Goin, one of LA's best chefs, at Goin's small-plates restaurant and wine bar, AOC; McCook was then promoted to sous-chef at Lucques.

Ellerbe was named for Ellerbe Road in Shreveport; just off that road was McCook's grandparents' house, where McCook fondly remembers time spent in the garden.

As you walk around to Ellerbe's front entrance from the back parking lot, you'll pass by huge metal tubs overflowing with herbs. Pretty and fragrant, they set the stage for the "local and in-season" concept that plays out so nicely on the plates. And in the end, what McCook cooks is absolutely Texan.

A salad of mustard greens, lettuce and chunks of warm, roasted carnival squash tasted just right for the season, with spiced pecans from Comanche, shaved raclette from a Fort Worth cheesemaker, Deborah's Farmstead, and a honey vinaigrette that balanced the slightly bitter greens. Frisée tossed with julienned salami and paired with cannellini beans was lovely, if dressed with a little too much of a bright, lemony vinaigrette. A couple of fat slices of late-season "homegrown" tomato from Scott Arbor (an organic farm in Seguin) came with buttermilk dressing, a few soft nuggets of excellent Brazos Valley blue cheese and mini hush-puppy "croutons." The combination was wonderful, if the tomatoes, which had good flavor, were rather too firm.

And that corn soup? McCook played down the corn's sweetness, making it creamy but not too, with a wonderfully dusky flavor and gentle heat from the chiles, and crumbling queso fresco on top. It's a perfect Texas dish for this in-between season.

A moist, flavorful grilled airline chicken breast (airline means part of the wing's attached) came with a sumptuous zucchini and potato gratin and wilted Swiss chard; fried capers gave it a zingy accent. That was a nice plate.

Ditto the veal piccata, with its hot, crisp breading that sealed the juices in the tender cutlets. A generous portion, this was served with a not-quite-successful risotto. Sautéed greens (again Swiss chard) made things right, though, and that veal was so good.

The glazed petite pork shank had terrific flavor, but would have benefited from longer cooking (the meat could have been more tender). The accompaniments, black-eyed and cream peas and fried Carter Farms okra, rocked.

Curiously, the portion sizes were all over the place. Thick, rosy slices of excellent baseball-cut steak (a middle sirloin) grilled over pecan wood was positively grand – in flavor and in size – served with a glorious mountain of terrific garlic fries and some of that homegrown tomato. But that pork shank really was on the petite side, and sautéed halibut, though beautifully cooked, looked like a spa portion next to that big plate of veal piccata and that bonanza of two giant double-cut lamb chops.

It might be worth asking about the size of any given dish, as, likely as not, there will be some alluring side dishes you can add. One night that meant that fantastic corn-meal-battered fried okra, as well as a dish of candied local sweet potatoes with sautéed mustard greens. The sweet and bitter played off each other wonderfully.

With any luck, you can order a side of Louisiana maque choux: grilled corn kernels tossed with delicious little Texas bay shrimps and red pepper. (The quartered tomatoes in the dish seemed too big, and didn't add much. Maybe they'd be better cut smaller?)

The other thing that was all over the place was the service. One night it was professional and attentive, with glimmers of the kind of thoughtfulness you don't often see, such as an offer to bring some regular baguette slices with a cheese course in addition to the raisin-nut bread that came with it. (Baguettes seem to be at a real premium: A few precious slices come tucked into a tiny basket. They're happy to bring more if you need it, but it feels very carefully parceled out.) Another night the service was amateurish.

And I'm not quite sure who's at fault here, but one of my guests asked for herb tea, and was told they were out of *all* tea. Their supplier didn't come through with it, explained the server, and they had been out of regular and herb tea for two days. (Um, couldn't someone stop by the supermarket?) Meanwhile, the restaurant's surrounded by those big pots of herbs. No one on the premises seemed to know how to make fresh mint tea, so we walked the server through it. Whew!

The brief wine list disappointed too. The selections around \$35 looked dubious; otherwise the only red under \$68 was a Petite Sirah-Petit Verdot from Lodi. (I never pay more than \$45 for a Lodi wine.) But King tells me the wine list is constantly in flux.

Happily, the desserts were wonderful; all the recipes are McCook's, who approaches pastry more like a savory chef than a pastry chef. I absolutely loved her rustic winter squash tart with a gingersnap crust, and her intense, perfect cappuccino pot de crème. And we all went gaga over her lightly sweet bread pudding with whiskey sauce that looked like an upside down muffin, even my friend who

doesn't usually like bread pudding. The only dud was an icebox lemon-meringue pie with a decent filling and a tough crust.

I look forward to stopping by now and again as the seasons change to see what Molly McCook's got cooking.